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PRUDEN ON POLITICS

By Wesley Pruden



Yellow journalists, up from the grave

How low could a reporter stoop today for a story and keep his (no laughing, please) ethics?

In some newsrooms, this question is forever unsettled. There's a fine line between legitimate aggressiveness and belligerent indecency, and most reporters usually know where that line is. If they don't, their editors do, and they hew to it, however reluctantly.

The Golden Rule does not necessarily apply on newspapers, no matter what you may hear from superannuated editors and learned obdudsmen at seminars on the First Amendment. Joe Sixpack will not be treated with the gentle respect that, say, the publisher's wife can expect as her due. Most of the time, though, there's an attempt to be decent.

But not always. Charles Lindbergh never forgave the reporters who, in 1932, slipped into the morgue with hammers and screwdrivers to pry open the coffin lid for a look at what was left of his young son after six weeks in the shallow grave provided by his murderer.

Forty years later, submitting to a rare interview after I had been warned not to mention anything remotely to do with the kidnapping of his son, the Grey Eagle poured out his still-simmering rage.

All that was the era of yellow journalism, of course, when photographers for the old Daily Mirror and the Journal-American prowled the Manhattan tenements listening to their police radios, waiting for the bulletins that identified a child who had been run over by a trolley or a man who had been bumped off in a liquor-store holdup.

The "best" photographer hurried to the victim's home, knocked on the door, stepped back with his Speed Graphic in tight focus, and when the unsuspecting mother or wife answered, gave her the news as straight and as brutally as he could. He waited a split second, giving the poor woman's face time enough to contort in pain and agony, and only then popped a flashbulb in her face.

It was dirty business, but you had to admit the photograph, blown up to a full page, was often a knockout.

Nobody would do that today, of course. We're all something called "journalists" now, eager to be invited through the front door to sit down to dinner with nice folks. Well, *almost* nobody would. But there's not a managing editor in the country who would instruct his reporters to pry open coffin lids or manipulate the agony of a grieving mother.

Well, not very many. That sort of thing — "yellow journalism" — is almost entirely the province now of the television crews, from whom nobody expects anything more than their discarded beer cans.

But believe it or not, just the other day a familiar-looking fellow crept up to the door of William J. Casey at Georgetown University Hospital and demanded to be let in. A

The nurse on the door shook her head. She had her orders. The gravely ill director of the Central Intelligence Agency, recovering from brain surgery, would have no visitors except his immediate family and any others specifically authorized by the family.

"But he sent for me," the man said. "He wants to see me."

There was something about his chunky physique, his blunt, insolently chiseled features, his enormous sense of self-importance, that not only looked familiar, but gave him the appearance of a man whose own mother wouldn't trust.

"No visitors," the guard on the door said. Mr. Casey's doctors were prepared to be adamant, so precarious was their patient's fragile grip on life.

"Look," the man said, "let me just put my head through a crack in the door. As soon as he sees me, he'll know me."

Soon a supervisor was called to deal with the man's impudent persistence. The supervisor demanded identification. Only then did the man say — reluctantly, as if summoning a stunted sense of shame from deep within his bowels — that he was Bob Woodward of The Washington Post.